"We're Here to Complete, Not Compete"

A Report from a Demonstration Project to Connect Charter Schools and Other Public Schools

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Introduction

The title of this report—*"We're Here to Complete, Not Compete"*—quotes the founder of a charter school in Detroit. He was speaking as part of a panel at the second National Charter School Conference sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (ED). The panel, chaired by the Acting Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education in ED, focused on the future of charter schools and their role in public education.

What did the speaker mean—". . . .complete, not compete?" He was signaling the desire of at least some charter schools to set aside a sometimes tacit and sometimes overt tension between charter schools—a special category of public schools—and the "regular" public schools. He was asserting that charters and "regular" schools are all *public* schools with the common goal of improving the education of all students. He was acknowledging that charter schools are a different kind of public school *and* that they are not for all professional educators or for all customers of the education system. He was suggesting that there is a role for charter schools but that they are not being established to destroy the existing system. He was making an overture*:* Let's work together. His comments, and those of others from both sides of the fence who attended the conference, represented a sea change from a distinctly adversarial tone at the first National Charter School Conference held about a year and a half earlier.

The change in the tone of the dialogue between charter schools and other public schools between the first and second National Conferences was particularly striking to the staff of a federally-funded demonstration project, *Project Connect*, that is the subject of this report. The theme of our project has been "the cross-fertilization of ideas and practices between charter schools and other public schools." The concept of charter schools and other schools learning from each other arises from the theoretical proposition that charter schools may stimulate broader reform of public education by serving as laboratories for school improvement. Many policy makers have used this proposition to

Exhibit 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF CHARTER SCHOOLS
PARTICIPATING IN THE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

School	Location	Status	Sponsor	Level	Enrollment (1998-99)
Arizona Education Academy*	Phoenix, AZ	New[1]	Local school board	Middle school	----
CIVA (Character, Integrity, Vision, and the Arts*	Colorado Springs, CO	New; opened 8/97	Local school board	9-12	100
Integrated Day Charter School*	Norwich, CT	New; opened 9/97	State school board	K-6	220
Ixcalli Charter School*	San Diego, CA	New; opened 8/99	Local school board	K-12 (1-3, 6-7 initially)	----
Lanikai Charter School*	Honolulu, HI	Conversion; chartered in '96	State school board	K-6	300
Colin Powell Academy	Detroit, MI	New; opened 9/96	University	K-12 (currently K-7)	250
Guajome Park Academy	Vista, CA	New; opened 9/95	Local school board	6-12	1,000 (4 sites)
San Carlos Charter Learning Center	San Carlos, CA	New; opened 9/94	Local school board	K-8	200
Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy	Flagstaff, AZ	New; opened 8/96	State school board	9-12	200
Henry Ford Academy	Dearborn, MI	New; opened 8/97	Regional educational services agency	9-12 (currently 9-10)	200

*Affiliated with the National Education Association's Charter School Initiative

[1] Toward the end of the demonstration project, the founders group for this charter school decided that, for a variety of reasons, the school could not move ahead with its plans.

push through charter school legislation in their states. However, in 1997 when we began the demonstration project, it was not at all clear that the charter school movement accepted the responsibility of outreach to other public schools. At that time, the dialogue between charter schools and other public schools could barely be heard.

Project Connect has been a joint project of SRI International (SRI) and the National Education Association's (NEA) Charter School Initiative (CSI). It was funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and involved 10 charter schools in six states*:* Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, and Michigan. The project included five schools that are participating in NEA's Charter Schools Initiative, a 5-year effort begun in 1995 to study the efficacy of charter schools as models for improving student achievement, enhancing professional development, and strengthening ties between public schools and their communities. NEA provides monetary support and technical assistance to these schools. In addition, the *Project Connect* team identified and invited five other schools from across the country to participate in the two-year demonstration. Some basic facts about the schools can be found in Exhibit 1. These 10 charter schools have helped us to define the needs, issues, problems, and solutions in establishing a climate for and approaches to the cross-fertilization of ideas and practices between charter schools and other public schools.

What Issue Did Project Connect Explore?

There are several hypotheses about the potential impacts of charter schools. One is that charter schools will somehow change the face of public education and nudge the "system" out of its complacency by serving as laboratories for best (or at least different) practice in the areas of curriculum and instruction, school organization, and/or school governance. Since changing the system is not likely to occur by osmosis, testing this hypothesis requires some kind of interchange between charter schools and other public schools that makes their similarities and differences transparent. In this demonstration project, we sought to explore the mechanisms available in 10 local contexts to ensure that communication between charter schools and other public schools are open and that

lessons learned are widely shared and constructively discussed within the public school system.

From previous work in the field (e.g., SRI's evaluation of charter schools for the California Legislative Auditor's Office), we knew that, although some charter schools are connected to each other through advocacy groups and associations, few are even loosely coupled with the mainstream education system. New "start-up" schools—the status of nine of our 10 participating schools—tend to be particularly isolated. Thus, our goal in the demonstration was to work with the participating schools to develop closer links between charter schools and their traditional counterparts so that the charters would not become isolated entities with no potential to influence the public school system at large.

To provide useful and practical information for both policymakers and educators, we structured our study around the following questions:

- Why is sharing important?
- What do charters have to share?
- Who should charter schools share with?
- What vehicles are available for linking schools?
- What are the barriers and facilitating factors to sharing?

During the first year of the study, team members conducted multiple focus groups at each of the participating schools to explore these questions in depth. The focus groups involved key stakeholders, including teachers, school administrators, students, parents, community members, business and university partners, and district staff.[2] These focus groups helped us understand the general relationship that a specific school had with the local educational context and specifically addressed issues of (1) what the charter school might have to share and (2) where and how the sharing might take place.

Information from the focus groups clearly demonstrated that each charter school had a unique position in its local context. Some of the differences that we documented were linked to the type of agency that chartered the school. For example, Colin Powell

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[2] The focus group protocols are appended to this report.

Academy in Detroit had very little contact with the Detroit Public Schools, in part because it was sponsored by a distant entity—Central Michigan University. The school staff realized that they would have to be proactive if they were to forge a link with the district in which they were located. On the other hand, San Carlos Charter Learning Center had a close relationship with the district that not only sponsored it but also expected it to be a demonstration site or laboratory for other district schools. Another school was clearly resented by the local school district. Two schools that partnered with museums had national reputations, which put pressure on them to disseminate information perhaps before they were ready to do so. In short, 10 schools, 10 stories, 10 contexts that needed to be taken into consideration when thinking about the issue of sharing with other public schools.

After analyzing the focus group material, *Project Connect* study team members prepared a feedback memorandum for each school. The memo summarized what stakeholder groups said about what the school might potentially share and how, when, and where outreach might occur. Originally, we planned to prepare a generic feedback memorandum designed to outline a general process for sharing that would be appropriate across sites. We quickly realized, however, that it was critical that we target our feedback toward each school's individual issues, needs, and context.

At the end of the first year of the study, the participating charter schools, with assistance from the project team, designed action plans for sharing ideas and practices with others in their community and beyond. During 1998-99, the schools implemented the plans. This report, which documents how the outreach efforts went, is one of two primary products of the demonstration. The other volume, *Sharing Ideas and Practices: A Handbook for Charter Schools* is a technical guide for other schools that are interested in strengthening linkages in their own contexts. Both documents are available at NEA's website: http://www.nea.org.

Why is Sharing Important But Difficult?

Probably the most important reason for charter schools to share their successes and failures with the traditional public schools is because they *are* public schools. Charter schools are given public per pupil funding like any other public school. They are also given the opportunity that some traditional public schools have to a lesser extent—through waivers—to create an educational program that fits their needs and objectives. Providing detailed information about both successful and unsuccessful strategies would enable the larger public school system to build upon charter schools' experiences. As a result, charter schools would move into the mainstream of education reform and be defined by the lessons learned from their implementation, not by the threat they ostensibly pose.

Another reason that sharing is important for charter schools is that they and other public schools are really not so different from each other. Many "regular" schools are experimenting with innovative interventions to improve student outcomes. New American Schools and the federal government's Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program are promoting and supporting whole-school reform based on validated models of school improvement nationwide. Other networks such as the Coalition of Essential Schools, Accelerated Schools, and the Basic Schools Network have connected and supported "regular" schools in improvement efforts for years. Some schools utilize state waiver policies in ways that are very similar to the freedoms from regulation allowed through the chartering process. Size—most charter schools are small, according to the National Study of Charter

> ### Charter school principal:
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> *While [we] feel a responsibility to share lessons learned and to meet with colleagues outside the school, the truth is that time is an issue and there is not enough time for us to meet with each other. Every effort is being made to provide time for reflection on assessment and instruction. [We] hope that as we get more experience in our new school, we will have more time to share ideas.*

Schools[3]—may be the single biggest way in which charter schools and regular schools differ. And there are certainly important lessons to be learned from that.

So if charter schools and other public schools have much common ground, why do they tend to be at arms length from each other? Should something be done to alter the situation? In focus group discussions, the *Project Connect* charter schools and their constituent communities all accepted the proposition posed by the demonstration that charter schools, as publicly funded schools, have an obligation to be open and communicative with other educators. The hard part was making connections and following through.

This charter school had been denied a charter by its local district but was subsequently granted one by the state. When it eventually opened its doors, there was a great deal of within-district animosity toward the school staff and the families who had "abandoned" the regular public schools. The rancor continued throughout the two years of *Project Connect*, obviously affecting the way that we and the school had to think about an action plan for sharing with other educators.

As we expected, isolation was a common condition among this network of charter schools. (Of course, that might be said of schools in general.) Several of the charter schools in our study were isolated from other public schools, including other charter schools, for varying reasons.

> ### Charter school lead teacher:
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> *There are a lot of charter schools in [our city] and in [our state]. It's a little bit scary sometimes that I haven't seen or heard much in the way of what happens at those charter schools and how they are successful and not successful.*

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3 RPP International. (May 1999). *The State of Charter Schools: Third-Year Report.* Washington, DC*:* U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Some of the isolation resulted from the political backlash of the chartering process (as in the example cited earlier), but in other instances, the isolation was self-imposed.

If influencing other educational organizations and institutions were on my radar screen, I would do a better job of it and probably have more of an impact.

Or the result of benign neglect by the system:

It wasn't so much our reaching out, because nobody really wanted to be reached out to.

Sometimes the initial start-up phase for charter schools is very difficult. Staff work long hours to get the school up and running. As a result, they bond strongly with each other and

> **Lead teacher of a new school:**
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> *I know that California has a group of people who work in Sacramento. It's called CANEC [California Network of Educational Charters] and they tend to share information about charter schools and have charter schools share among themselves. And they have conferences and I attended one not too long ago. I mean that's a way of getting information out there . . . But I couldn't tell you in simple terms what I've learned from them, or what they actually share . . .It's just that I've gotten a lot of information from this group of people . . .on the way that the laws in California have been changing . . .. and working with the funding and requirements. . . . [It's] not necessarily what's a good way to operate or how successful some schools are being or what the mistakes of some schools are.*

don't feel the need to develop relationships with anyone outside of the school. Although she disagrees with the attitude, the principal of one *Project Connect* school said:

Other schools in the area I truly feel snub the district. I refuse to do that. Within two months after opening our doors, I invited the Superintendent two representatives of the [School] Board to come visit our school site.

Some soon found out that the longer that they worked in isolation, the more difficult it was to forge a link with the traditional schools in their area. Although charter-to-charter communication was not a focus of Project Connect, several schools reached out to other charter schools or found support in a state network of charter schools.

Two schools in the study were in the planning stage throughout the project. These schools were encouraged to incorporate a commitment to local outreach into their vision statements and job descriptions for school leaders. Thus, even in the extremely hectic

early months of staffing and opening a school, an expectation for openness to sharing is being nurtured:

Our design is written such that we become a laboratory for new teachers. [The university partner] will put student teachers in, and the university professors will be there in the classroom observing what happens and looking at our practices. Also, the union is looking at us in terms of how we can share with the union so that they can share with other schools in the district.

What Do Charters Have To Share?

When we introduced the notion of cross-fertilization of ideas and practices between charter schools and other public schools in focus groups, a common reaction from participants was puzzlement about what they would share. Many of the schools considered themselves too new and untested to have much information that other schools would want to know about:

It's difficult in just the short amount of time that we have been in operation to really be doing this [program model] as well as we would like to be able to do it.

With only two years completed at our school, the lessons ready to be shared are few.

Our hypothesis for the demonstration project was that other educators and the public have a lot of curiosity and perhaps a good deal of misinformation about what charter schools are (e.g., private schools), what they do, and the conditions under which they operate. Therefore, charter schools should consider sharing information about all aspects of their school and educational program, including decision-making/governance, curriculum and instruction, staffing patterns, and use of funds. We had to keep repeating this assertion: You don't have to perfect an idea or practice before getting some new perspectives that might even help in refining your plans. But it remained a hard sell throughout the demonstration, primarily, we think, because charter school educators do not perceive many "safe zones" where they can share without negative consequences.

Another important element of most charter schools is a high level of parent involvement. Their methods of getting parents involved and their creativity in terms of what roles and responsibilities parents have in their schools could be a resource for any school. Several of the charter schools participating in our study not only involved parents but also had developed a learning community among staff, students, parents, and community members. Some of their success in this area may have to do with their small size in comparison to typical public schools or to the fact that they are schools of choice. However, how they developed into learning communities and their underlying philosophies might be useful stories for traditional public schools to consider.

The issue, of course, is not just what charter schools might be inclined to share but also what other educators and the public want to know about charters. In September 1998, representatives from the study team and one of the participating schools presented information about the demonstration project in a break-out session at the annual Governor's Educational Summit in Michigan. A majority of participants in the session were from traditional public schools and districts. All of the participants were asked to brainstorm in small groups about the types of information that would be helpful to share with traditional public schools. Discussions yielded the following areas of interest:

- student achievement
- curriculum and instruction
- technology
- governance
- finances/budget
- staff development
- parent involvement.

Participants were also interested in the extent to which charter schools received support from local educational agencies, intermediate districts and the state; how they serve special needs students; and what the impact of choice is on the attitude towards learning of parents and students.

The discussion this session generated convinced us that, in spite of the tensions that exist in many localities between charter schools and other public schools, "regular"

public schools and the public are very interested in learning about and from charter schools.

Who Could Charter Schools Share With?

Charter schools might share information about their programs and structures with groups or individuals at several levels of the public school system as well as with the general public. Some examples of core strategies for sharing information include holding joint professional development opportunities with other educators and creating informal learning opportunities, such as teacher networks. In the demonstration project network, individual charter schools are targeting outreach activities at particular levels of the education system, depending on their relationship with their local community. For example, if a charter school has a hostile relationship with a nearby traditional public school, it may be more successful in trying to create linkages at the district, county, or regional levels. The arrangements that charter schools in our study have worked out fall into the following four categories:

1) *Teacher to teacher/administrator to administrator* – CIVA Charter School is a school-within-a-school located in a wing of Mitchell High School. To begin the process of developing a stronger relationship with Mitchell staff, the charter school held a reception to enable staff at the two schools to become acquainted and have an opportunity to share information about their schools informally.

2) *School to school* – San Carlos Charter Learning Center developed a partnership with Brittan Acres Elementary School, which is located in the same district. The goal of this partnership is share expertise. The charter school specializes in instructional uses of technology; the regular school has had extensive training to implement a particular literacy program. Three teachers from each school spend approximately eight days during the school year in a partner teacher's classroom in the other school. In addition, each school conducts professional development for staff at the other school.

3) *School to district or multiple districts* – Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy (FALA) has been developing a relationship with central office staff at Flagstaff Unified School District (FUSD), as well as educators in the district's high schools. Through meetings involving the superintendent and a board member of FUSD, the executive director, academic dean, and board members of FALA, and the president of the Museum of Northern Arizona (a FALA partner), the partnership has been planning joint artistic performances, shared transportation, and a major museum-based social event for educators from the community's charter schools and traditional public schools.

4) *School to local community, state, or country* – Henry Ford Academy (HFA) has focused on creating materials about its school that it can share with parents, students, educators from local or far-away schools or districts, businesses, and the media. Since its inception, HFA has had an explicit goal of documenting its start-up and implementation in order to facilitate replications elsewhere. The school's unique design has generated a great amount of interest, producing visitors from all over the country. Producing explanatory materials has allowed school staff to disseminate a preliminary package of information rather than respond to each call. The school also designed a Visitor Fact Sheet, allowing potential visitors to indicate the type of information they are interested in prior to their visit.

What Vehicles Are Available For Linking Schools?

There are currently many vehicles that charter schools could use to facilitate their linkages with other schools. During the Governor's Education Summit in Michigan, the participants also brainstormed about the types of agencies or organizations that could facilitate or motivate this type of cross-fertilization of ideas and practices among educators. Some of the ideas they came up with included:

- Teacher or school board associations
- Parent/Teacher organizations
- Intermediate or county school districts
- The state Board of Education
- The Internet

Through these vehicles, the participants theorized, charter schools and traditional public schools could share in workshops or other joint activities, communicate about educational issues, conduct an employee exchange program, or present information at conferences. In fact, these are all strategies that are represented by activities undertaken by *Project Connect* schools. Some of the project schools had linkages built in from the start while others had to break new ground in developing relationships with their public school counterparts. As time has passed, the approaches that the schools are taking have begun to fall into some clusters.

The regional approach. The target for sharing information with other schools for one group of study schools could be characterized as "regional." Rather than focusing on outreach to schools and educators in the school district where the charter school is physically located, the charter school educators adopting the regional approach have looked further afield for opportunities to share. Generally speaking, the primary reason

for taking this approach is some level of discord between the charter school and a local district or local schools.

To assist them with regional outreach, charter schools sometimes identified partners such as national organizations, institutions of higher education, county offices of education, or state teachers union affiliates to help them in their ongoing efforts to communicate with other public schools. For example, Guajome Park Academy, a charter school in southern California, partnered with several state and national organizations (e.g., the American College Testing Program and a campus of the state higher education system) to sponsor a workshop on portfolio assessment open to all educators in that part of the state. The principal of this charter school (which has had a seesaw relationship with its sponsoring school district) reaches out to other educators by instinct but acknowledges that "Maybe you can't be a prophet in your own land," implying that sharing ideas and practices *within* one's own school district may be more difficult than sharing with schools and practitioners a little further afield.

Vehicles for Sharing
Guajome Park Academy

Conferences, workshops, and "gatherings" with teachers from other schools

Student public relations teams

Charter secondary school students helping younger children in district schools

Member of district School Board on the charter school's Board

Charter school included in a district bond election

A state-approved program for credentialling unlicensed teachers

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Another school in the demonstration network would concur with this analysis. Staff at this school have made virtually no headway with outreach efforts to the school district that two years ago denied their application for a charter. Instead, the Integrated Day Charter School has become proactive in creating linkages of many kinds with surrounding school districts via cooperative grant writing, joint workshops, and the

provision of technical assistance to classrooms, schools, and districts that are interested in features of the charter school's program such as multi-age grouping and project-based curricula.

The special function approach. For another group of demonstration project schools, the commitment to share information and communicate with other schools was "built-in" to a school's charter by virtue of the intention to serve a special function with a school district.   In these instances, interschool connections are a core goal of the charter school's design from the outset, and the linkages are defined prior to the school's opening. Two of the demonstration project schools that have not yet opened fall into this category, as does San Carlos Charter Learning Center (California's first charter school), which was designed to be a laboratory for innovation in its own school district.

By the terms of its charter with the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), the Kwachiiyoa Charter School—a creation of the San Diego Education Association and the College of Education at San Diego State University—will serve as a Professional Development School (PDS) for the district. In its capacity as a PDS, Kwachiiyoa will help to prepare new teachers for the district and will also help veteran teachers prepare for certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Its outreach is thus built into its core design. In addition, the job description for Kwachiiyoa's teacher-director explicitly includes a mandate to keep the charter school connected to the school district on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis through, for example, participation in district events and meetings.

Because Kwachiiyoa just became operational, we cannot yet know whether the "built-in" approach to encouraging cross-fertilization of ideas and practices between charter schools and other public schools will thrive in San Diego and Phoenix. Our optimism that this approach can be very effective is based on the experiences of another charter school in the demonstration network—the San Carlos Charter Learning Center (SCCLC). This school received charter #1 in California in 1994 as the result of an application prepared with the full support of the district's superintendent and Board of Education. Within its district, SCCLC is and always has been explicitly viewed by leaders as a

research and development laboratory school in which materials and practices may be tested and observed by other schools. This is not to say that there is not skepticism about the charter school among some district educators and families. However, over five years, SCCLC has developed a strong sharing relationship with one district school and a looser relationship with others. In addition, the teacher-director of this school feels so strongly about outreach and the capacity of schools to learn from each other that she developed a small network (initially supported by federal Public Charter School Program funds) of California schools interested in investigating issues of student assessment at the classroom level.

**Vehicles for Sharing
San Carlos Charter Learning Center**

On-going partnership with another local school

Cross-school visits

Presentations at local PTA meetings

Shared staff development workshops

Regular presentations to local School Board

SCCLC is proof that some educators intend to seriously test the hypothesis that charter schools can help improve the "system" by remaining loosely coupled to it.

The unique resource approach. Some charter schools are so unique in some way that word of them spreads widely. Their reputations—and their outreach—may be statewide or even national in scope. They field many phone calls and host many visitors. While the attention is flattering, it places special burdens on these schools as they try to politely handle public relations yet remain focused on their primary goal of educating students. In addition, while these schools have their own needs for learning from and with other public schools, they may be seen by other educators as so privileged that a true peer relationship among schools is difficult to develop. The two museum-based schools in the demonstration network have found themselves in this situation.

Henry Ford Academy (HFA) in Dearborn, MI is a joint venture of the Ford Motor Company, the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, and the Wayne County Intermediate School District. The school also has established ad hoc relationships with two institutions of higher education. These powerful partners are creating a senior high school program on the property of the Museum and in full view of Museum visitors. In its first two years of operation, HFA has been inundated to the point of disruption with requests from charter school founders' groups and regular public school educators for tours and explanations of its philosophy and program. To protect itself and the needs of its students, HFA has needed to gain control over its sharing behaviors by developing outreach materials and limiting visits to specific, announced days. Now, with its fame issues largely under control, HFA is considering its own needs by developing a local or regional peer group of educators from which it can take as well as give. An issue in this regard is the fact that the school draws students from all over Wayne County, MI and is reportedly the most racially and ethnically diverse high school in the state.

The Flagstaff Arts & Leadership Academy (FALA) is in a situation similar to that at HFA but somewhat mitigated by the relative isolation of Flagstaff in comparison with HFA's metropolitan Detroit location. FALA is a visual and performing arts high school physically located on the grounds of the Museum of Northern Arizona and operating in partnership with the museum. Word of the uniqueness of FALA's program spread rapidly and nationally, augmented by news that the establishment of multiple charter schools in the community had had an acknowledged impact on the local school district and was causing the district to re-examine its priorities, policies, and programs—a textbook example of what many in the charter school movement believed should and would happen. FALA is a unique resource in its community and wants to serve in that capacity. It has initiated a number of activities to give students and teachers from other high schools access to the richness of the museum. Like HFA, it has given much more than it has received. Now, a new superintendent would like to bring FALA back into the school district fold—perhaps as a magnet school and perhaps under its own terms and conditions. This would be a unique turn of events in the charter school world that might offer a prototype for lowering barriers between charter schools and other public schools. However, FALA will not make any snap decisions about the offer.

What Are the Barriers and Facilitating Factors to Sharing?

While all of the schools in the demonstration project found that there were some barriers to the sharing of ideas and practices, the extent to which these barriers interfered substantially differed by site. Some of the common barriers were closely related to a scarcity of time and resources. Other barriers were linked to the type of school (whether it was start-up or conversion) and the school's charter granting agency (whether it was within or outside of the K-12 public school system). A small number of barriers were idiosyncratic to particular schools' local contexts.

The most common barrier across sites was that, given their stage of development, most of the schools had to focus nearly all of their efforts on implementing their educational programs. Charter school staff quickly realized that a tension exists between (1) trying to put time toward developing relationships with outsiders (e.g., the local community, business or university partners, or traditional public school staff) and (2) focusing on getting their schools up and running. Many educators in our study sites found that they were required to work long hours and were forced to prioritize activities. Often they became focused on pressing issues, while sharing their schools' successes and failures or establishing peer relationships beyond the school's walls were activities for the back burner.

Another barrier was a second cousin to the commonly held and previously discussed belief among the schools that they had nothing to share yet. They were also persistently

and consistently apologetic that they had not done any "significant" sharing since the last time we asked them. When we probed, they told us about things that had occurred which sounded like sharing to us.   Eventually, we realized that the schools were only willing to "count" major events such as a reception. We, on the other hand, counted everything and believe that the "baby steps" and mundane communications between charter schools and other public schools offer the best hope of establishing a normal working relationship. The following list from the Henry Ford Academy is an excellent example of baby steps. (HFA has also taken many "giant" steps toward relationship building with school districts in its region.)

Vehicles for Sharing: Small Steps
Henry Ford Academy

Intermural sports events

Hosting the regional track and field events

Mentor teachers from other schools for HFA's young staff

Co-scheduling of vacations with local districts

Piggybacking on one district's decision making about snow days

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One of the biggest barriers for the newly created schools was a misconception about or a negative reaction to charter schools in the local community. Several schools described a climate that was hostile toward their existence. They felt that much of the hostility stemmed from misinformation about the funding of charter schools, alleged creaming of students, and mischaracterization of charter schools as something other than public schools.

A barrier that we found at only one site that had a strong business partner was a feeling from the local community that this school was so different from other schools that nothing about the charter school's experiences could be relevant. The business partner provided a facility and technical assistance to the school, but did not provide any additional funding. This school had difficulty at first conveying to other schools that it frequently dealt with the same issues as other public schools in spite of its partnership.

Despite the challenges, the schools in the network often found ways to capitalize on facilitating factors or find strategies to overcome particular barriers. One factor that helped in several situations was the presence of a leader outside of the school who promoted the communication and collaboration of charter schools and traditional public schools. For example, the President of the Museum of Northern Arizona, an agency that is a partner to FALA, recommended that the museum hold a social event at the museum for all public school educators in the community, including charter schools. This would allow the educators to meet informally in a more "neutral" setting.

> **One charter school leader:**
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> *I really think that one of the things that is a real handicap for charter schools is that there is a lot of type about 'Charter schools are going to save the world and save education in the United States.' And that's got to be a setup for failure in communicating to the traditional system. Because a lot of people in the traditional system don't think that they are in jeopardy. So our new student recruiting and public relations strategies and asking others to share with us I think are important strategies.*

In some cases, charter schools found that local media coverage provided opportunities for them to share what their school was about. However, this strategy had potential drawbacks as well. For example, the principal of one school was interviewed several times by print and broadcast journalists, gaining positive publicity for her school but also allowing the district superintendent to distort and misquote her words to create additional alienation between the charter school and the regular public schools.

Two final facilitating factors included focusing the sharing activities on issues that affect all public schools. For example, Colin Powell Academy in Detroit organized a workshop on preparing students for the state assessments and invited educators from other city schools to attend. Other demonstration schools found or created similar opportunities. Guajome Park Academy conducted a workshop on portfolio assessment. Integrated Day Charter School presented information about its program at conferences and meetings held by the state teacher's association (which is committed to helping this school succeed). Lanikai Charter School in Hawaii regularly participates in parent/community networking meetings.

The charter schools in the demonstration project also tried to overcome barriers by shifting the focus of their interactions with other schools toward the development of a two-way dialogue. They realized that the relationship would be stronger if they built it upon the idea of learning from each other, rather than the notion that the charter school educators are somehow the "experts" who can tell other public schools what works.

Some of the schools found that they had to consider a different audience to be effective. For example, one school had planned a meeting with school administrators in the local district, but found that there was little interest from the schools. The school leader decided to try a different strategy, connecting instead with the superintendents of multiple districts across the county from which the charter school draws students. The hope was that these administrators would be more interested in learning about and sharing information with the charter school staff.

Conclusion

We began this demonstration project by asking the question: How can charter schools and other public schools support and learn from each other? At the time (October 1997), the climate for cooperation and communication between public charter schools and "regular" public schools was generally neutral-to-cool—in some local contexts, downright frigid. Today, two years later, the climate seems more temperate. The tone of discussions on the topic of sharing and collaboration at the March 1999 National Charter School Conference was conciliatory. School district administrators acknowledged that charter schools are a fact of life and will likely yield lessons of value to other schools. A number of charter school leaders were passionate in their determination to not become isolated from their former colleagues. As one said, "I believe that charter schools must share with other public schools. If that means that I must cross the street or go the extra mile to initiate sharing, then I will do it!"

As this friendlier view of the relationship between different kinds of public schools expands (as it must), the question becomes not "Should we collaborate?" but rather "How can we collaborate?" The practical product that emerged from *Project Connect* is a volume called *Sharing Ideas and Practices: A Handbook for Charter Schools*. It is designed to help other charter schools take the initiative in establishing sharing relationships of their own and can be found at the website of the National Education Association: http://www.nea.org.

CONNECTING CHARTER SCHOOLS AND OTHER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Final Focus Group Protocol:
School Level Educators

1. Key philosophical and programmatic characteristics of the school where you work or that you are designing

Probes:

- Identify the characteristics
- Ideas that are important to teaching and learning at the school, and the sources of them
- Ideas on school governance and management, and the sources of them
- Primary goals*:* be specific
- Primary differences from other schools working with the same age students

2. Most pressing current needs of the school or proposed school and plans for meeting the needs

Probes:

- Financial resources
- Human resources
- Technical assistance/expertise
- Professional development
- Time
- Barriers to having needs met
- Who could help

3. Capacity for documenting what works and what doesn't

Probes:

- Accountability required by charter
- Accountability required of other public schools by state and local policies
- Accountability required by funders other than states and local districts
- What to document and when*:* ongoing versus summative documentation

Final Focus Group Protocol:
School Level Educators

4. **Sharing what works and what doesn't**

   Probes:

   - Primary audiences
   - Other possible audiences*:* other schools, district, union, community, state
   - News that is important to share
   - News that you might not want to share
   - News that you would like to hear

5. **Opportunities for sharing information on ideas and practices related to teaching, learning, and governance in this place**

   Probes:

   - Networks*:* availability, purpose, who belongs, outreach mechanisms
   - District-sponsored events and activities*:* required or not, purpose, utility (based on experience), who attends
   - School board meetings*:* interest in school-level stories
   - Regional or state events, activities, and meetings*:* opportunities to take leadership role
   - Union and professional association events, activities, and meetings*:* openness to new ideas and practices
   - Teacher education programs/local colleges and universities
   - Structural opportunities within the community served by the school
   - Other opportunities
   - Structural barriers to sharing information, e.g., lack of incentives
   - Who could help facilitate information sharing
   - Marketing the idea of sharing information

CONNECTING CHARTER SCHOOLS AND OTHER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Final Focus Group Protocol:
Mixed Groups

1. Development of charter schools in this area

Probes:

- Heard or read anything about charter school success
- Heard or read anything about charter school difficulties
- Know teachers who teach in or families that send children to charter schools

2. Purpose of charter schools

Probes:

- How differ from other schools*:* curriculum, instruction, governance, students served, other
- Why needed (reduce regulations, parental choice, safety valve, other reasons)
- Relationship to the "system"

3. Brainstorm words associated with charter schools

Probes:

- Accept all suggestions
- Looking for "public"

CONNECTING CHARTER SCHOOLS AND OTHER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Final Focus Group Protocol:
Mixed Groups

4. **Assuming that improvement in student learning is the most important goal for all schools, the most pressing current needs of the schools in this district are:**

   Probes:

   - Financial resources
   - Human resources
   - Technical assistance/expertise
   - Professional development
   - Ideas
   - Time
   - Parental involvement
   - Other issues
   - Barriers to having needs met
   - Who or what could help*: introduce idea of better communication and sharing of ideas, practices, and results if it does not come up*

5. **Premise*: Charter schools and other public schools would benefit from opportunities to share ideas and practices with each other.***

   Problem*: How could that occur in this place?*

   Probes:

   - What the goals of information sharing activities should be
   - Who could help facilitate information sharing
   - Stakeholder groups that should be involved
   - Structural barriers to sharing information, ideas, and practice
   - Attitudinal barriers to sharing
   - Ways to begin*: Incentives, generating interest*

CONNECTING CHARTER SCHOOLS AND OTHER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Final Focus Group Protocol:
Secondary School Students

1. **3 things that make this school special for you**

   - Accept all answers

2. **Compare going to school here with previous school**

   - Attraction to the school
   - General climate/educational atmosphere
   - Required classes
   - Elective classes
   - Teachers/administrators
   - Tests and grades
   - Homework
   - Friends
   - Other activities
   - Student responsibilities
   - Parent involvement

3. **Getting information about the school**

   - Source(s) of information
   - Kinds of information available
   - Most important information
   - Other kinds of information that would have been useful to you and your family

4. **Giving information about the school**

   - To people your age about your school
   - To people at work, at church, or at other places that you go frequently
   - Things about your school that interest other people